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ABSTRACT

The stages of the policy process are examined and explained in terms of the decision making framework. The policy process is comprised of four stages; policy analysis, policy formation, policy decision, and political analysis. Political analysis is the performance of the market analysis needed for a decision. The political weight, rather than the net benefits of a course of action, is the concern of political analysis. Evaluation and research data have been repeatedly used/misused in the determination and shaping of educational policy and in the resolution of educational funding and political decisions. Evaluation occurs in a political environment. Program objectives must be clearly delineated to enable evaluators to develop appropriate questions for investigation. If evaluations are to be used in decision making and program improvement, the evaluator has to become more than a mechanic playing with numbers that are often poor proxies for program outcomes. To evaluate a program effectively, the evaluator needs to know the nature of the program, the reason the program was established, and the motivations of the political entities and policy makers. (DWH)

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Walking the Fine Line: Political Decision Making With or Without Data

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Does evaluation really shape social policy that's the question, or are we walking the fine line of political decision making with or without data? Cronbach (1980) points out that our political and organizational realities determine what evaluation can do. Misunderstandings of the policy making process are a source of not only faulty evaluation practices and criticism of sound practices, but also are a source of faulty data use practices. Recommendations for evaluation and data use should derive from a sound understanding of how and why actions are taken. Additionally, administrative and personal connections among the key actors as well as the political forces to which the actors are sensitive strongly influence the course of evaluation and the use of the insuing information. It should be pointed out that strictly honest data collections can also generate misleading pictures unless questions are framed to expose the facts which are useful to program supporters and detractors.

Evaluation and research data have been used/misused repeatedly in the determination and shaping of educational policy and in the resolution of educational funding and political decisions. In debates over controversial programs "liars figure and figures often lie." The evaluator and the shaper of social policy have a responsibility to protect his/her clients from both types of deception. One might rightfully ask what is the interaction of policy and decision making? What is a policy question? Green (1982) points out that neither the most efficient action nor the most technically proficient analysis are precise enough to resolve the central conflict between the social aims which give rise to a policy question.

Wise policy is not made with enough knowledge to determine a decision, and policy questions are never asked out of a primary interest in adding to our knowledge. It can be argued that our answers to policy questions may be improved by obtaining better information and by doing better analyses which will then be more rationally persuasive. That such questions, can, will and usually are answered even without such information goes without saying. Evaluation findings can never completely determine a position.

One basically needs to look at the policy process in terms of the entire decision making framework. The policy process is comprised of the policy analysis stage, the policy formation stage, the policy decision stage, and the political analysis stage (Green, 1982). Policy analysis can be defined as the rational or technical assessment of the net marginal tradeoff between different policy choices. The question becomes (a) which set of values will be advanced, (b) which will not, and (c) with what net benefits? Setting forth the marginal costs and benefits of a range of choices is one thing -- policy analysis. Selecting one balanced choice or a range from within the possibilities is another -- policy formation. The decision as to which choice or choices will be made is still a third — policy decision, and performing the market analysis needed for that decision is political analysis.

In short, policy analysis is that rational, technical analytic performance in which the central question is not whether X is a good thing to do but simply what are the marginal effects of doing X and what are the marginal effects as contrasted with doing something else.

Evaluators can take a leading role in this activity provided that they do not suppose they are actually evaluating policy as opposed to merely recording the consequences of doing X or Y. Policy formation on the other hand is that activity by which we seek to gain agreement on what form a specific policy can or will take as opposed to what form it ought to take. By contrast, policy decision can be described as the authoritative action of some office, administrative or legislative, by which a line of action for the moment at least is established. Policy decision is not so much an activity or process as it is a momentary point in the continuing business of government.

Political analysis is concerned not with determining the net benefits of a given course of action, but with their political weight. The aim is not so much to determine the net social benefits of a particular policy, but to determine its constituency. The rational standards of policy analysis are the standards of theoretical reason, but the rational standards of policy decision and political analysis are the standards of political judgement. In short, the exercise of political judgement is a practical activity. It is also an evaluational activity, but the result of that activity may differ from or even contradict the results of policy analysis. For researchers and evaluators, political and legal considerations are just as important as technical considerations depending on the level of evaluation. For example, at the state educational level, evaluation attention and consideration is generally focused on management assistance or policy analysis to the general exclusion of the improvement of instruction. Because of such orientations and considerations, the ability to communicate and persuade

in a highly politicized environment becomes an essential skill. In addition, budgetary and financial analysis, problem definition, understanding of the context and the ability to know what can be effected and how within the organizational setting are also needed for effective evaluation within state agencies or whatever contextual environment. Green (1982) suggests that "If we just had a methodology sufficiently sophisticated and a body of relevant data sufficiently refined we could answer whatever policy questions may come along." If this were true, such a person obviously has been captured by a delusion. The delusion is in supposing that our policy question is a theoretical question when in fact it is not. Any time we suppose that a policy question can be resolved by some addition to our knowledge, then it will turn out that what we supposed was a question of policy is a theoretical one and has turned out to be merely a problem of engineering or efficient administration instead. We should not however abandon all attempts to improve methods of evaluation in policy analysis. Since our indecision in matters of policy does not arise from the lack of such methods, therefore, it is unlikely to be laid to rest by their development. In policy we are confronted with indecision not because our knowledge or technical facility is faulty but precisely because we are confronted with a kind of question that in principle cannot be answered with any increment or improvement of knowledge. Our answers to policy questions may be improved by better information and better analysis in the sense that they will be more rationally persuasive, but such questions can, will and usually are answered even without such information.

Insofar that the evaluator presses for greater certainty and actually seeks to become the determiner of policy he/she is less of a professional at his/her best than the politician or executive at his/her best. The drive of evaluators to whatever extent they seek to find in practice a means of resolving policy questions is in fact a drive to make the politician an evaluator which is to say a technician of policy decisions. Such an achievement, if ever realized, would constitute the most radical transformation of our political institution and the practice of policy decision that one can imagine. It should be stated that the evaluator who expects objectivity suffers his/her greatest shock in discovering that his/her information is reshaped for political purposes.

It is interesting to note and recognize how unlikely it is that political contenders will ever be silenced by a factual evaluation report. We must also conclude and see how unlikely it is that an evaluative conclusion will unite all parties behind the same option. It might be interesting to point out the headstart evaluation as a well known example of (a) selective belief of information and (b) attack and counter attack. Williams (1969) saw its reception as typical of the kind received by an impact appraisal that arouses political interest.

> "The history of headstart evaluation is a stark illustration of what might be termed the implication of the iron law of the absolute evaluation flaws. That is, as a general rule, the absolute methodological and logistical decisions in any evaluation can make political infighting near certainty when evaluation results threaten a popular program."

In short "questionable evaluation practices" can always be attacked on methodological grounds for political and bureaucratic purposes. For the analyst, these decisions mean that even a relatively sound evaluation can easily cause severe controversy and the battle, although expressed in the jargon of the professional statistician, can be nasty. For example, with hints of foul play, or at least the claim that the evaluator is insensitive to program needs and problems, the Westinghouse example serves a good case in point on the ferocity of the struggle. Tense situations will arise that require great sensitivity, good timing, good judgment and probably a good amount of pure luck in order to survive the political battle. It is not certain that the analyst will acquire through any formal training or experience the "art" of bureaucratic infighting required to be effective. If the iron law of absolute evaluation flaws holds, one may well ask from the perspective of varied interested parties whether studies such as the Westinghouse evaluation primarily summative was and more importantly is really worth the effort.

Basically, let me say that only the "best of techniques", random assignments, strict sampling, objective measurement, rigorous inference, or whatever, will not provide magic armor for the evaluation. A researcher and evaluator can only make his/her conclusions invulnerable by limiting them strictly to what the research operation showed and by attaching an index of statistical uncertainty. Only with this armor will you keep an evaluation study out of the realm of the political universe. One should remember

that the audience of an evaluator's report are officials whose perspectives are continually changing -- not only whose perspectives are continually changing but whose constituency might be continually changing. Clear choices among alternative programs really are seldom made on the basis of evaluation. Rather, it's a kind of course of least resistence that is followed. Sad, but true, for the professional evaluator.

The evaluator sometimes may also wish to be political. Strictly honest data collection can generate misleading pictures when questions are not framed with the intent of exposing the facts which are both useful to partisans of the program and those useful to critics. An example might be the time honored practice of choosing items for educational assessments that about half of the students are expected to pass. Such items are more powerful for ranking students than are easy or hard items. NAEP adopted another policy specifically for the sake of "even handiness". Its tests at a given age deliberately included items that about 90% of the students were expected to pass in order to give warranted support to educators who want to advertise school success. Items that only a few students were expected to pass were included also as a way to disclose shortcomings (Finley and Berdie, 1970).

Clearly, evaluation in terms of a political dimension is universal for it involves the use of information in changing power relationships. Additionally, Carol Weiss (1972) points out and reiterates the same saying that "evaluation has always had explicity

political overtones, it is designed to yield conclusions about the worth of programs and in doing so is intended to effect the allocation of resources". This function of evaluation, as handmaiden to policy, is probably the characteristic of evaluation research that has attracted competent researchers despite all the discontents and disabilities of practice.

Additionally a great number of researchers feel that formal evaluation is an inherently political process and it has in some instances even greater policy consequences than do bond elections. Significant decisions regarding evaluation, that is (a) what to evaluate (b) how, (c) when and (d) by whom, are made on the basis of the political values and resources of those including the evaluators themselves involved in any given system. Evaluation practitioners also concur with the body of knowledge about the political uses of evaluation. Evaluation obviously occurs in a political environment and evaluators are participants in the competition for stakes often influencing positions but never wholly determining decisions. Basically, evaluators should become influencers on the political scene. If evaluations are to be used in decision making and program improvement, the evaluator has to become more than a mechanic or tinkerer playing with numbers which are proxies and often poor proxies for outcomes of programs. To evaluate a program effectively, the evaluator needs to know the nature of the program, the reason the program was established and the motivations of the political entities and policy makers. Evaluators can assist in collaboratively developing appropriate questions to be investigated

based on a good understanding of the objectives of the program. This may not be such an easy task since many program objectives are not explicit in the policy statement. There are usually several political motives at play and questions are not necessarily common to all the players in the game. Determining what to evaluate can be very difficult.

As evaluation technology moves into the 1980's, evaluators and researchers need to bridge the gap and bring data and decision making into harmony, i.e. evaluation will become more political and politics will become more evaluative. The evaluator will become more of a politician for social policy and the politician more of an evaluator.

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